

Air War College's Regional Cultural Studies group travels to the Middle East

**The following was compiled by
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(Editor's Note: The Air War College's Regional Cultural Studies research trip to the Middle East took place in March 2011, prior to the upheaval that has since erupted and continues in Syria. Consequently, we ask readers to consider the following account within the context of the political environment at the time of the visit rather than frame the account within the context of the current situation in Syria. Thank you.)

Syria is a known unknown

In March 2011, an Air War College Regional Cultural Studies Course group, consisting of 19 students and faculty, embarked on a trip to Syria that shed light on a "known unknown" that we had studied for months, and yet we only had book knowledge about the region and no ideas of what to actually expect. This was an historic trip for the Air War College students and faculty since no war college group had visited Syria in almost ten years. Furthermore, it was also a historic visit for the United States Embassy staff and our Syrian hosts since American delegations are few and far between. Our expectations would quickly change as we began a once in a lifetime experience.

Upon arrival in the capital city of Damascus, our group exchanged greetings and introductions with our hosts in a reception room decorated with overstuffed couches, beautiful artwork, and huge portraits of the current President Bashar Al-ASAD and his deceased father President Hafiz Al-ASAD. Our reception entourage consisted of the U.S. Defense Attaché, senior Syrian military officers, civilians, interpreters and three energetic Syrian General Officers, from the Syrian Air War College; the High Military Academy and the Deputy Chief of Protocol. The Syrian generals repeated one theme and message throughout our reception: "We greet you with large smiles and happiness and we want you all to leave with larger smiles and immense happiness." Our journey was filled with countless known unknowns, and the following is a small sample.

Our group's first full day began with a tour of the historic city of Quneitra. The city of Quneitra has a complex history that spans the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel. The city was almost totally destroyed when the Israelis departed and Syria has chosen not to rebuild it; however, the site serves as a living history lesson and memorial in the eyes of the Syrians. Despite a contentious Syrian/Israeli relationship in the Golan Heights, our group learned of peaceful exceptions to policy that allowed Druze apple growers, brides, and students to transit between the two countries. Prior to our visit, most of us were unaware of this.

At our next destination, we met with the United Nations agency that patrols and enforces the Syria–Israel border crossing in the northern Golan Heights area. The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) is a multinational military organization represented by units from the Philippines, Austria, Croatia, Japan and Canada. The UNDOF mission has enjoyed over 36 years of successful peacekeeping in a unique, yet small mission area that includes extremes of high snow capped mountains, jungles, and deserts.

Our group enjoyed cultural tours of the Syrian National Museum, Umayyad Mosque, Teshrin Memorial, Palmyra Ruins, and Maalula Monastery. This cross section of the country allowed us to see why many call this the cradle of civilization. On display in the National Museum were many artifacts, including the first musical note and a stone carved with the first alphabet. Of great interest to our group was the Maalula Monastery, located in the mountains north of Damascus. The monastery is unique because it is one of the few locations in the world where the inhabitants still speak Aramaic. Our tour included a meeting with the Mother Superior, who described the history of the Monastery that now includes an orphanage. The known unknown deciphered by our group was the Syrian government's religious tolerance that permits an Aramaic speaking community to co-exist in close proximity to the capital city of Damascus.

Our group enjoyed the hospitality and diplomatic resources of Ambassador Robert Ford and his Embassy Team. It should be noted that Ambassador Ford is the first U.S. Ambassador to Syria since 2005. Among the Syrian government agencies we met with were the Syrian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Minister of Economics and Trade, and the Deputy Military Chief of Staff. Our group noted that the Syrians they met consistently communicated their country's desire to pursue closer relations with the United States.

Our trip was filled with personal and professional known unknowns. These experiences challenged each of us to ponder our preconceptions before, during, and after each event. Most of our group continually remarked about the uniqueness of our experiences, and all departed with a better understanding of the political and social challenges and opportunities Syria faces, and the warmth and hospitality of its people. Prior to our departure, our hosts served us coffee and tea and stated: "We say farewell to you with large smiles and happiness, and we observe that you are all leaving Syria with larger smiles and immense happiness."

The Many Complexities and Facets of Turkey

The Turkish state literally and figuratively serves as a strategic bridge that joins Europe and Asia, and we quickly discovered the many complexities and complications that define Turkey as a leader and trend-setter for the Middle East and European regions. Turkey was the second of three stops for the 19 students and faculty members on the Air War College Regional Cultural Studies Course journey. In the capital city of Ankara, our first session consisted of a briefing by Major General Stanley E. Clarke III (USAF), senior defense officer in

the Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) and defense attaché. He and his staff described the many facets of cooperation the United States has with Turkey and the surrounding region.

This perspective was amplified when we met with the United States Ambassador to Turkey and his country team. The theme of all the briefings reinforced the strategic importance of Turkey and the dynamic and complex relationship it has with the United States and indeed most nations in the world. Our next agenda event was the ceremonial laying of a wreath at Anitkabir, which is the mausoleum for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of modern Turkey. As we toured his museum we realized how complex this soldier statesman really was. One fascinating fact about this man was that he adopted twelve daughters and one son. One of his daughters actually went on to become the first female pilot in the Turkish military. We noted respectful pictures of Atatürk in every government and military building throughout our stay in Turkey.



As part of the formality, the Air War College RCS group marched, along with Turkish military guards, to the Tomb of Atatürk. Col. William Walker presented a wreath and Col (S) Jill Singleton signed the guest book on behalf of the War College. Following the ceremony, the group toured a museum of artifacts from Atatürk's life. At the next stop, our group met with several Turkish Government agencies,

including: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Security College, and International Strategic Research Organization (USAK) think-tank. Many themes were reinforced but the major theme that was starting to emerge was how powerfully complex Turkey is economically. Later our group met with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs where topics including Turkey's adaptation to the post-cold war international system, European Union membership, regional foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors", and economic outlook, and world ranking were discussed. During the meeting our group learned that Turkey shares a common strategic goal with the US: "Peace, Prosperity and Stability" between regional and among international systems.

Our group proceeded to Istanbul for the next phase of our visit to Turkey. While in Istanbul we visited the Turkish War College and received briefings from the Commanding General and his staff. The Turkish war college compares to the war colleges found in the United States; however, they are service-centric and the curriculum spans a two-year period. During our visit we met several students to include a U.S. student who had been attending for almost a year. Our American colleague's stories of respect and fellowship with his Turkish counterparts were exceptional and informative. Following our visit to the war college, we visited 1st Army Headquarters located in the historic Selimiye Barracks which was used as a British field hospital during the Crimean War. This building was made famous by the exploits of Florence Nightingale who was the founder of the first nursing school. During our meeting with the 1st Turkish Army Command we learned their mission includes mitigating national security threats, conducting disaster and relief operations, and participating in peace operations. When asked how Turkey interacts with its regional partners, we were informed that the 1st Army has good military arrangements with Syria for border mine clearing and combating terrorism. The 1st Army suggested that the key to effective military operations and cooperation is operating in coalitions, and maintaining an attitude of cooperation.

While in Istanbul, the RCS group met with the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD), which is a non-profit and non-governmental organization that operates as a think tank representing over 2,500 international business interests supporting over fifty percent of Turkey's economy. Turkey represents the world's 16th largest economy, and foresees itself rising into the top ten over the next two decades. TUSIAD focuses on harnessing the enthusiasm and efforts of Turkey's young and educated population with goals of achieving European Union membership. TUSIAS mentioned Turkey's growing economy must continue its recovery from the global recession and improve its technology and manufacturing bases. The Turkish economy enjoys its current levels of 50-60 percent foreign direct investing coming from the Europe.

Our group was immensely fascinated with Istanbul being Turkey's largest city, and one of the world's most historic. The city's culture was everywhere and easily seen. Our tours included visits to the Kariye museum, Aya Sofia, Basilica Cistern, Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque. Although the number of sites was overwhelming, our group was able to experience many of the more fascinating aspects of Istanbul. Our professional tour guides managed to bring our classroom studies into reality, and through their expertise the dynamic and complex environment was made understandable. One cannot understand the history and modern relevance of Turkey and its unique and important positioning as the bridge connecting Europe and Asia without a visit to and thorough tour of the country and its awesome sites.

Israel and the depth of choice



We arrived at the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, Israel on a redeye flight; nevertheless, our group had been anticipating this portion of the trip with great enthusiasm so our exhaustion was unnoticed. We were processed through the airport by the Air Force Attaché and after a few hours of rest we traveled from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem with U.S. and Israeli escorts. This portion of our trip took us to numerous locations that are in the news every single

day, and yet are the same ancient locations and corresponding histories that have been chronicled in some written form for thousands of years. A more somber mood fell over the group as we immersed ourselves in a tour of the Holocaust Museum. Our solemn tour guide continued to repeat that “It is all about choice” and some choices lead to life and happiness and some choices lead to death and despair. This jolting, significant experience would set the tone for the rest of our journey in Israel.

Our tour of the Holocaust Museum was followed by an excursion in Jerusalem’s Old City. It was simply amazing and enriching to be in such a religiously significant locale. In the Old City, people from a variety of religious persuasions have co-existed and influenced the development of a number of modern day religions. It’s difficult to put into words the effect our visit had on each individual both personally and professionally.

The opportunity to visit the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem and the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv provided the group the chance to examine the U.S.-Israel relationship from two perspectives. This perspective was broadened when we were able to have breakfast with Lieutenant General Michael R. Moeller (USAF) who is U.S. security coordinator, Israel-Palestinian Authority. He put the complexity of the situation into an understandable context. Again, everything is dependent on the past, present, and future choices.

Southern Israel may not be an area where most tourists visit but it was an amazing holistic learning experience for us all. We started this portion of the trip with a tour and lunch at a self sufficient Kibbutz. Although it felt like a warm and inviting environment we were soon brought back to reality when we were shown that the elementary school was constructed of

massively thick concrete to protect the children from rocket attack. We were then taken to the black arrow memorial that overlooks Gaza. The IDF officer briefed us on the history of this location and what was happening in the current environment. Following that tour we were taken to the Netafim Factory and Kibbutz that specializes in drip irrigation. They developed this revolutionary technology in 1965 and have been a world leader in transforming the desert into a sustainable living environment. We learned the next day that tragic choices had been made and the Kibbutz (where we visited the concrete school) was rocketed by terrorists in Gaza.

After transiting Israel from South to North we visited the historic city of Tiberias. After visiting Kapernum and the area where the Christian apostle Peter had lived and fished we were brought back to modern reality when we overlooked the Lebanese border. We looked into the area that was occupied by Hezbollah and used to launch rockets into Israel. The Hezbollah had decided to attack Israel from Lebanon and their choice led to Israeli retaliation. Following the border visit we were able to visit Rafael industries where they developed a system to counter the enemy rocket threat called Iron Dome. This system was recently deployed achieving successful interception of enemy rockets. Israel chose to invest in the future protection of its citizens and had achieved success.

The last night and day in Israel were hosted by the commander and staff of the Israeli War College. This gave us the opportunity to reflect on our entire experience through the prism of strategy, law, terrorism and future thoughts and perspectives. The IDF General stressed the depth of the Israeli choices throughout its history and expressed that this was his homeland and he had the responsibility to protect Israel. The delivery of his viewpoint combined with all the historic locations, experiences and people we met in Israel showed us how critically important the U.S. and Israeli relationship is. It also showed us how “It is all about choice.”

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